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ABSTRACT

The task of writing teachers is to convince the reluctant developmental writer to see writing not just in terms of grammatical correctness, but in terms of process or of discovery. Once the writer begins to see composition in this way, he or she may see that grammar is not irrelevant or arbitrary. By being taught the revision process, students can see themselves as writers, not just as students memorizing grammatical rules. The three stages of revision are oral-revision, correction-revision, and transformation-revision. In the first step, the student is asked to read aloud what he or she has initially written. By repeating sentences out loud, the student starts to hear that writing resembles speech. In step two--after the student has begun to recognize basic grammatical concepts--he or she learns to recognize and eventually remedy his or her mistakes. In this step, the instructor indicates errors in students' writing by placing a bracket around them. By altering mistakes themselves, students are able to grasp grammar in a more immediate way than by just receiving the teacher's corrections. In the third step, by rewriting or revising a previous work, the developmental writer can see that writing is more than a product. Although these three revision steps have been presented as separate steps, the instructor must keep in mind that all three are interchangeable. (HTH)

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# The Revision Process for Remedial Writers

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We've all heard students-- especially the more stubborn ones, the more defensive ones, voice their opposition to studying grammar and composition by ardently saying, "Our friends know what we mean. Why do we need to know punctuation and all that stuff?" Or else, we often hear this response, "I can't write. I hate English." Naturally, we shake our heads and retort, "English is important, communication is essential." Of course, our problem, our task is to convince the developmental writer of this belief by making him see writing not just in terms of correctness, but of process, of discovery. When he begins to see composition in this way, he may see that grammar is not irrelevant, that punctuation and usage are not arbitrary rules conjured up by English teachers and professors who have nothing better to do than grade papers. Through revision, taught both in the classroom and the writing-lab, we can possible convince him that writing is an individual process as well as product.

It is in the revision process the student can see himself as a writer not just a student memorizing grammatical rules. We've all seen the student who does well on tests and quizzes but cannot fully apply to his own writing what he has learned throughout the semester. Mina Shaughnessy, realizing the difficulty most students have in recognizing their sentence errors, says in her book, Errors and Expectations, "Unfortunately, proofreading, the central skill for this stage of the writing process, is one of the 'simple' skills students seldom learn."[1] Consequently, she calls for remedial classes that will "make writing more than an exercise, for only as a writer, rather than an exerciser, can a student develop the verbal responsiveness to his own thoughts and to the demands of the reader that produces genuinely mature syntax."[2] While teaching at the City College of the City University of New York, she discovered-- like most of us-- that the student whether out of laziness, ignorance, impatience, or insecurity, is inclined to leave alone what he has written, believing he cannot say anything differently; he does not or cannot see alternatives-- ei-

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ther grammatically or contextually. Therefore, in order for the student to see other possibilities both in what is said and how it is said, as soon as possible, both in the lab and in the classroom, the stages of revision must be taught. These three stages of revision are oral-revision, correction-revision, and transformation-revision. Of course, these are not totally separate, but for the sake of explanation, they are presented in this sequence.

In this first step, oral-revision, the student is asked to read outloud what he has initially written. This can be accomplished either in the writing-lab or in the classroom, and it should be begun the first or second week of class. Naturally, in either environment, the instructor or laboratory aid should not try to embarrass the student but rather encourage him. If the beginning writer has written something quite personal that he doesn't want to share, such a request should be honored. (For the most part, I have found that most remedial students are extremely honest about their feelings and not shy about presenting them to others). Of course, in the writing-lab, the student working one-on-one with the aid will only read a sentence or two outloud. In either situation, the instructor or aid should ask the student,when he reads a troublesome sentence, if he could re-read it and perhaps say it another way. By this method, the student will begin to develop the skill of listening to what he has written and begin to concentrate on what he meant to say, for often, the student will see, upon reading the passage, that he has accidently left out words, letters, or word-endings.

Also, by the student repeating sentences outloud, he starts to hear that writing does resemble speech. The importance of speech resembling writing is many times forgotten, and this is regrettable since the student's speech is quite often more grammatically consistent in both sentence structure and content than his written work. Bill Bernhardt, who for years taught writing and reading and who has been the Coordinator of the Developmental English Program at The College of Staten Island, has observed in his book, Just Writing: Exercises to Improve Your Writing: "When students progressed to a point

where they wrote as well as they spoke, the product, while far from perfect in many cases, was always a distinct improvement in comparison with previous writing."[3] Mina Shaughnessy, believing the student needs to hear what he has composed, says, "the first objective in the improvement of written syntax ought to be to give the student access in writing what he already knows as a speaker."[4]

Obviously, there is more to revising a piece of written work than reading outloud. It is in step 2, correction-revision, where the student must learn to recognize and eventually remedy his own mistakes. (This does not signify, however, that he will completely abandon step 1). After the student has begun to learn basic grammatical concepts, this second stage should be implemented, and, for the most part, in the writing lab, for the lab is generally suited for the student's individual needs; the beginning writer will feel less threatened because he can correct by himself, at his own pace, errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and usage. This practice of the student becoming more of an editor, a proofreader through constant attention to his own writing without always having the teacher peering over his shoulder and badgering him for perfection is advocated by Shaughnessy:

> ...eventually a student can learn to correct in his own writing what he has learned to correct in someone else's. His failure to do so immediately does not necessarily call for a repetition of the lesson but for more opportunity to apply the lesson to his own writing, preferably without any more teacher intervention except for a check in the margin or a general direction to edit the essay for the troublesome feature.[5]

Therefore, in the first stage of the correction-revision method, the instructor should indicate errors on the student's paper by only placing a bracket around them. (The teacher should mark only those errors which have been discussed in class; otherwise, the writer may be too confused and thus completely miss the point of the exercise). In the writing lab, the student can, if he wishes, read the passage outloud, and the assistant can ask questions, such as, "How many ideas do you have in that sentence?" "Is this idea a complete sentence?" With the assistant, at first, interrogating the student in such a manner, the writer will begin to ask the same questions

himself. Or at least, he will know that such questions are asked after initial composition. Later on, in the semester, he will not require such verbal instruction.

An example of this first stage in step 2 of revising is from an average English 101 (Written Fundamentals) student. Brackets indicate errors:

> Yesterday I went to town in Safford to see my girlfriend because we had a fight the other night. I told her it wasn't my fault [ ] but then I apologize [ ] to her at her parent's house [,] I knew she was sad to [.]

It is then the student's responsibility to correct his mistakes. As usual, this developmental writer did not have any problem understanding what his errors were, nor did he show any reluctance to remedy those mistakes. However, when a student does have trouble, the lab assistant can ask questions-- for example, "How many ideas do you have in this sentence?" "What verb tense are you using?" Of course, if the student still does not comprehend why there should or shouldn't be a comma, the aid can explain the rule while at the same time emphasizing that revision is a learning method. Generally, the student will be able to amend his errors without much help from the assistant. Through this method of allowing the student to alter, for himself, his writing, he is able to grasp grammar in a more immediate way than he does by just turning in grammar exercises or by just receiving papers back with the teacher's notes and abbreviations in the margin.

The second example of this procedure is from a non-native speaker who wrote this piece of prose-- from a longer essay-- the first week of class:

> And while I am here at the college, I was hoping to take art class [,] but I didn't [ ] I am in General Education [,] I am not sure of my major yet. Hopefully I will have made up my mine [ ] by fall semester.

From this passage, one can immediately see that the student either did not understand the nature of compound sentences, or he did not know how to correctly punctuate them. The solution for such a problem as this is simple: give the student his own work to correct.

Chances are, the developmental writer will eventually learn what a comma splice or run on sentence is much sooner through revision than by concentrating only on grammar exercises which cover his problem areas. Also, from this passage, one can notice that the student had trouble with verb tense. In this instance, since we had not yet discussed tense in class, I requested the lab instructor to talk very briefly to the student about the nature of time in writing. A few weeks later, when we began our discussion of verbs and tense, I then placed brackets around those places where the verb did not match the time period of the passage. Undoubtedly, I should add that I generally mark all spelling errors even at the beginning of the semester, even before we have a spelling unit. Perhaps, I cannot contain myself, and I need to mark them, or perhaps, I believe the student can, especially on assignments written outside of class, look up doubtful or unfamiliar words.

As the semester progresses, or for those students who are more advanced, the teacher can mark a vertical line in the left-hand margin to indicate that something is wrong. This is the second phase in the correction-revision process. And, similar to the previous stage, the lab aid, before immediately giving the student the right answer, should ask the student questions concerning what might be wrong--thus, encouraging him to think for himself. Normally, at least for the student who really wants to improve, this procedure will enable him to apply what he has learned about grammar and punctuation.

And yet, there is more to writing than grammatical perfection. Sandra Perl, in her study based on her work with five beginning writers at the University of New York, points out that many students unfortunately "have accepted the notion that knowing the grammatical rules means knowing how to write."[6] In order to change this attitude, the teacher should tell the student to see if he cannot transform what he has written either through sentence combining, expansion, word deletion or addition. Probably, it is in step 3, transformation-revision, where, for the first time, the developmental writer can see that writing is more than a product; it is an important process where the student learns for himself how to write more effectively.

One exercise to increase the student's interest in the possibilities of expression is to have him re-write or revise a passage he wrote last week or even two months ago by experimenting with adding or subtracting words. This procedure can be implemented either in the lab or in the classroom-- or, for that matter, both. One possibility is the student can take a piece of free-writing (an exercise where he writes down whatever comes to his mind without worrying about spelling or punctuation) and change the word order or the verb tense to see what differences arise from such alterations. If possible, the student can also change simple sentences to compound ones or compound sentences to complex ones and visa versa. Another idea is to have the writer review three or four pieces of his writing to see if he can not improve them through changing sentence structure or word order. The teacher or lab assistant can write such questions on the board as, "Is there any place I can be more specific?" "Less wordy?" "Does the middle need more improvement than the beginning?" "The end?" These types of questions -- which can be found in Bill Bernhardt's Just Writing: Exercises to Improve Your Writing-- will cause the student to examine more carefully his own writing and thereby cause him to discover his own solutions. Even if the student's attempts at this phase in revision are not startling, at least he has begun to believe that writing, particularly his, can be altered. Ideally, this last step should be introduced early on in the semester, especially when there is a slack in the class schedule or when the student has completed his work in the lab and has a few minutes to spare. At first, this revision procedure may seem like more work for both the teacher and the lab assistant; however, not every written assignment produced in class needs to be corrected by either the assistant or the teacher. There are times when the student should explore what he has learned in the semester without having to worry about correctness.

A sample of a free-writing exercise, uncorrected, which I gave back to the student so that she could transform what she wrote before, shows how well many students can work on their own, provided they are encouraged. I told her not to be too concerned about perfect grammar; instead, I wanted her to "play around" with words and ideas.

First, the free writing:

> The sun was shining quit brightly; but was getting ready to go down for the evening I sat watching the children run play and even hit each other, yelling, "your it," I turned toward the sand and walk area just in time to see little Tony running away from his mom.

Four weeks later, in class-- although this could also be accomplished in the lab-- I asked her to revise the free-writing by inserting new words or by taking out unnecessary ones. Since we had discussed both compound and complex sentences in class, I asked her to see if she couldn't change sentence structure; she then, wrote this:

> While the sun was still shining quite brightly, but was getting ready to retire for the evening, I sat watching all the little children who were still running, playing, and even hitting each other. I turned toward the walk and sand play area just in time to see little Tony escaping from his mother.

Before the final revision, I asked the student if she saw any details or phrasing she gained on the second attempt but perhaps lost from the initial writing. She then re-wrote the passage a third time:

> While the sun shone quite brightly, ready to go down for the evening, I sat watching the children who were still running, playing, hitting each other, and yelling, "You're it!" I turned toward the sand play area just in time to see little Tony escaping from the arms of his mother.

As one can tell there is a marked difference between passage #1 and the final, revised piece of writing. At this point, I must confess that this particular student was an excellent student-- highly motivated and extremely teachable. For the most part, she had very little trouble with spelling, grammar, or punctuation.

Undoubtedly, one asks, "What about the poor student?" Certainly, an important question because many developmental students seem to need more help in their writing than sometimes we can possibly give them. However, even the slower student can more effectively understand grammar and punctuation through revising. Presented,

is the first version from a student who had to repeat English 101 (Written Fundamentals). This version also has brackets indicating the errors:

> As I turned the corner [] I saw an old friend [] Mark who looked different and fat. Mark went in this store to cash a check and cashier goes [do you have any identification.] Mark goes [sure my [] [] [] I glanced at it and smiled.

The student, then, in the lab, corrected most of the errors. The lab assistant kept asking the writer to read the passage outloud; by the second time, the beginning writer realized he had left out the article "the" before cashier, and he noticed he needed punctuation marks to signal dialogue and a question. Now, the second version:

> As I turned the corner, I saw an old friend, Mark who looked different and fat. Mark walked into the store to cash a check, and the cashier asked for identification. Mark goes, "Sure, here is my Bank Card." I glanced at it and smiled.

For the last revision, I wanted the student to see if he couldn't be more specific. The student thought that perhaps he could add more information at the beginning of the passage and at the end:

> As I turned the corner, I saw an old friend, Mark who looked different, for he seemed to be a little fat. Mark walked into the store to cash a check, and the cashier, asked, "Do you have any identification?" Mark said, "Sure, my Bank Card." She then read off Mark's name and number, 4336-3325.

Still, even in the last revision, the student has insisted on capitalizing Bank Card, but overall, the writing has improved. All three steps of the revision process were employed.

Although these three steps in revision-- oral-revision, correction-revision, and transformation-revision have been presented in this paper as separate steps-- they are, of course, part of the total writing process, for, as teachers and writers of English, we are aware that an author uses all three when looking over what he or she has written; we are all aware that writing is going over, changing, and going back. Thus, the instructor must keep in mind that step 1 should be applied again after step 3, that step 2 should be applied

after the student has re-written his second or third draft. The purpose of the three-step revision procedure is to introduce a new attitude, a new way for the student to examine his method of composition. Perhaps, for the first time, the developmental writer can understand that grammar and punctuation are essential to communicating effectively, and that writing can become an act of personal involvement where he can gain self-significance and awareness.

## Footnotes

[1] Mina P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 85.

[2] Shaughnessy, p. 89.

[3] Bill Bernhardt, Just Writing: Exercises to Improve Your Writing (New York: Teachers & Writers, 1977), p. 46.

[4] Shaughnessy, p. 87.

[5] Shaughnessy, p. 123.

[6] Sondra Perl, "Unskilled Writers as Composers," Teachers & Writers, vol 11, no. 1, 16.

## Sources

Bernhardt, Bill. Just Writing: Exercises to Improve Your Writing. New York: Teachers & Writers, 1977.

Perl, Sondra. "Unskilled Writers as Composers." Teachers & Writers, vol. 11, no. 1, 13-17.

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